‘TRUTH AND OPINION: Historical Essays’. BY C.V. WEDGWOOD. 1960 (“ ”)

HISTORY AND IMAGINATION (pg. 97-105)

IN TWO senses it may be said that history embraces the whole of literature: first because the creation of all literature occurs within the limits of history, and secondly, because all literature arises, directly or indirectly out of history, for all the potential history. The writer may treat his material in any number of different ways. He may express himself in romance or fantasy, in poetry, drama or satire. He may adapt and organise material copied from the world before him; he may soar into realms of speculation. Yet at some point every work of creative literature is attached, however slightly, to experience. At some point it must make contact with what we think of reality— the observed world around us. A work of literature, were this not so, would be inconceivable. No human mind is capable of ideas which have not at their source some kind of human experience. History, rightly understood, includes the whole of human experience. Therefore, it may be argued that all literature is in this wide sense historical.

But our education and the idioms that we use, emphasise certain elements of experience as though they alone were historical. A statesman is described as having “made history” as though this were a special function of a statesman; or a nation is said to be “making history” when it becomes involved in some particularly violent or remarkable circumstances. But every human being is making history all the time. We live in history as we live in air and we cannot escape it.

History, in the narrower and generally accepted popular sense, has supplied subjects for a very great part of the drama, the poetry and fiction of the world. Writers have taken up and simplified or embroidered some actual situation, some story whose principal characters were at least already outlined for them. Sometimes they have imbued such individual happenings with something of universal value. This use of historical material goes back a long time before the arrival of the self-conscious and sophisticated creative writer. It is one of the earliest and most natural tendencies of man to try and distil out of the harsh facts a more poetic and universal meaning, to give them at once a quality of simplicity and permanence. In the process of turning history into the simpler and pro-founder stuff of poetry it was sometimes found necessary, and therefore permissible, to adapt and alter the material. From this fusion of a little that was historic with much that was poetic sprang many of the great epics, *Iliad* or the *Chanson de Roland*, the *romanceros* of Spain, the ballads of Scotland and much of the folk literature of the world. Until recently more sophisticated writers retained something of this natural freedom in adapting the facts of the recorded, or remembered, history to their needs. In this age when we are by way of making a god of accuracy— and accuracy is not necessarily at all the same thing as truth— it is worth pausing for a moment to look at the effect of this, not on historians but on creative writers who are attracted towards history.

The extent to which a writer dares to modify the facts about which he decides to write depends on the conventions of his time. Schiller was perfectly at liberty to arrange a meeting between Mary Queen of Scots and Queen Elizabeth— a meeting which, if we are to be accurate in our history, never took place. But the liberties allowed to a modern dramatist or a modern novelist by a modern audience are not nearly so great because there is now considerable confusion in the public mind as to the purpose of the historical drama or novel — or for that matter the historical film. It tends to expect from them instruction in history as well as, or possibly even more than, aesthetic pleasure or mere entertainment. The modern

writer therefore who wants to convey something more valuable than a little elementary historical instruction, and yet wants to use material taken from history, is compelled more or less strictly, to keep within the limits laid down by record.

It is instructive to notice how often in modern times a creative writer who is using historical material has to employ some different approach or some ingenious device when he wishes to emphasize the more profound message that he is seeking to convey. He has by this means to evade the possibility of purely pedantic criticism on the part of the public. Shaw in *St.John* transferred the whole of his last act to a dream, and in the dreams all laws of realism can be suspended. Again T. S. Eliot in *Murder in the Cathedral* uses throughout a vocabulary and a technique which removes the drama from the solid earth of the twelfth century and lodges it essentially in the human soul which knows no chronology.
It was possible for Shakespeare, Goethe, for Corneille, for Schiller, even for Victor Hugo, to use historical names was empty vials into which they could pour their own conceptions and so illuminate the passions, the weakness or virtues of man. Shakespeares's Macbeth is not an exact portrait of a certain eleventh century King of Scotland but is a profound and illuminating study of a living comprehensible man, weak, not without nobility, gradually corrupted by ambition. As such it has a value far superior to a more accurate portrait of the historic Macbeth. Schiller's *Don Carlos* is very definitely not an exact portrait of the eldest son of Philip II. But it is a most wonderfully moving and compassionate study of a young irresolute man, torn between conflicts which are too great for him. These and others like them, are great studies of human character. To ask whether they are true accounts of the people whose names they carry is irrelevant. The poetic truth is too effective to be challenged by mere historical truth.

It is a delicate and rather dangerous thing for a historian to appear to attach only an inferior value to accuracy of statement about historical events and there are contexts in which the suggestion that poetic truth could be superior to historic truth might be dangerous. But these examples are not intended to prove that the creative writer has the right at all times and places to tamper with history. The rights and liberties which he is free to exercise in dealing with historical material vary with the conventions of his age, and liberties which are acceptable and fruitful at one time are no longer acceptable and therefore can no longer be fruitful at another. Yet whatever the present situation, it has been from very ancient times a natural and healthy habit of mankind to poeticize and to simplify the most striking events of history: to modify individual historic truth into simple permanent forms. The creative artist may within the conventions of his epoch as legitimately use historical material in the same way.
As for the historian himself, if he has any ambition beyond that of amassing a mere catalogue of unrelated and therefore unintelligible statements, he must approach his material as any other creative artist does— with the sense that it contains some essential and permanent truths which it may be his skill or good fortune to release. It is with the character of those truths and with certain difficulties in approaching them that I am chiefly concerned.

The poet, the dramatist, the novelist are free to exercise their imagination as widely as they choose. But the historian may not be allowed so long a tether. He must fulfil his function as a creative artist only within very rigid limits. He cannot invent what went on in the mind of St. Thomas of Canterbury. The poet can. He cannot suppress inconvenient minor characters and invent others who more significantly underline the significance of his theme. The novelist can. The dramatist can. The historian, as Sir Philip Sidney has said, "is captive to the foolish truth of a foolish world." Not only is he captive to the truth of a foolish world, but he is also captive to a truth he can never fully discover, and yet he is forbidden by his conscience and

his training from inventing it.
He gains his knowledge through evidence which, at the very best, is incomplete; which is always contradictory: which raises as many questions as it solves: which breaks off tormentingly just where he needs it most, or, yet more tormentingly, becomes ambiguous and dark. He can never establish the truth. He can only grope towards it; he gropes, moreover, with an intellect which, being furnished in the twentieth century, finds it extremely difficult to understand any other, which is over confident, apt to leap to wrong conclusions, unaware of its own shortcomings or, if aware, then unable to make allowances for them. The greatest scholar can never reach more than some kind of partial and personal version of the truth as it once was. All the efforts of historical scholarship are ultimately reduced to a mere pattern human opinion. In the preface to his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* Jacob Burckhardt has somewhat discouragingly said:

"In the wide open ocean upon which we venture, the possible ways and directions are many and the same studies which have served for this work might easily in the other hands not only receive a wholly different treatment but lead also to essentially different conclusions."

The painful predicament of the historian has never been better expressed. But it is important to remember that, in Burckhardt's mind this defeatist view was closely linked with another implicit assumption: that neither the uncertainty nor the personal nature of his own judgements exonerates the historian from applying the upmost of his critical faculties and scholarly abilities to establishing the truth, or the fact, according to his own lights. To do anything less is intellectual treason.
Surmounting the difficulties of discovering the truth about historic truth about historic facts, as far as in him lies, is a matter for the technical skill and conscience of each individual historian. It must be assumed of him, and other writers, that he will have the self-respect to live up to what he considers the highest standards of his own profession. Historians certainly do commit deliberate dishonesties and, far more often, *bona fide* mistakes; there are many blindnesses, perjuries, tergiversations, errors of judgement, blemishes of character, foibles, frailties, prejudices and shortcomings among historians as among any average group of mortals— or as among any average group pf writers for that matter.
None the less there are among historians a few who have from time to time cast as much light on the predicament of man as the free creative writers. There have been a few with as much insight into the human situation (within the limits allowed them), as much vision and compassion as the greatest writers outside the special bondage of history. But there is a terrible paradox inherent in the historian's profession which has done damage both to historians as writers and to society at large. The historian ought to be the humblest of (*wo*)men; (*s*)he is faced a dozen times a day with the evidence of his own ignorance; he is, in a sense that on other writer is, in bondage to that material. Yet it is just precisely the historian among writers who is often the most arrogant. It is just precisely the historian who will often claim that he is not merely the master of his material but, by being the master and interpreter of the past, also the master of the future. It is precisely among historians that the most conceited assumptions of knowledge, the most assured prophecies of the future, the most *ex cathedra* judgements of right and wrong can be found. On closer examination these judgements, these prophecies, these constructions of vast philosophies explaining the past, present and future of man will all prove to be rooted in the temporary political prejudice or philosophical beliefs of a particular historian or of a particular age or society, There have been among such philosophies and among such interpretations of history on a large scale, a few whose inherent nobility gave them a value of their own, not a history but as moral teaching. Great names from St. Augustine onwards shine out to redeem the noble error.

But it is an error. It is the great pitfall of history. The historian who forgets to be humble, who forgets the essentially inconclusive nature of his evidence and his won fallibility, who furthermore confuses the temporary opinions of a party or a nation or a religion with absolute standards of right and wrong, can unfortunately be very persuasive. He can take the petty developments of a few generations or a few centuries for some immutable law of progress; or imagine that the ephemeral rivalries of nations are in some way eternal and inevitable; or indulge half a dozen other aberrations. He may lead whole societies with him into error and make them act upon it.

The historian when he feels this powerful temptation, could take a lesson from the geologist. The Alps, for example, so majestically immutable as they seem, are to the geologist upstarts. They are mere matter of thirty million years old. These youthful mountains, which came so late in their present shape and grandeur, show up the entire duration of recorded history for the wretched scantling time that it is. From this little fragment, this few thousand years—about which we can never know more than the hundredth-thousandth part that uncertainly—historians have tried to construct systems and cycles of scientific immutability. This is the minute kingdom over which, from time to time, a historian lords it as though he were the arbiter of the universe.

In pursuing such speculations, the historian is surely wrong—sometimes nobly wrong, sometimes foolishly so. The importance of history is not that of a science or a system; it is as a record of human beings, a source from which human experience can be studied. The purpose of this study is not to make general rules either political, economic or moral, but to get to the heart of the human problem. After several thousand years of experience in human society it is still the problem that we do not understand.

It can be justly argued that the historian's function is neither more nor less than that of any other creative writer. All literature arises from human experience and therefore all literature arises in the ultimate resort from historical material. The discipline and technique to which the historian submits his material is different from that of the imaginative writer. But the nature of his material is the same and the historian in so far as he stands or wishes to stand within the bounds of literature at all, has the same task as that of the creative artist. He is not to judge and prophesy and to create systems, but within the limits allowed to him, to illuminate the human soul.

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